

Forecasting NATO's Burden-Sharing Disputes: The Past, Present and Future of Burden-Sharing

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One of the most persisting sources for disagreement within NATO is the question over burden-sharing which belongs to one of the most studied issues within the Alliance. However, in our monograph that we are currently finalising, we argue that not enough has been said about the various dimensions of the burden-sharing debate.

Burden-sharing is often regarded as an internal NATO issue that can be manageable through rational calculus. We advocate a broader reading of the issue and claim that burden-sharing should not be isolated from the overall frameworks of transatlantic dynamism or regional security. The burden-sharing debate is a constantly evolving historical phenomenon, and the closer we come to our own time, the more challenging it becomes to isolate burden-sharing questions from other issues concerning the Alliance. This is why burden-sharing can be better understood if it is tackled as a cyclical phenomenon with distinguishable phases that gains additional prominence during transitional phases of the Alliance, such as organizational reforms, enlargements, major changes in dominant military strategic thinking or new out-of-area operations.

The existing burden-sharing literature can be divided roughly into two epistemological traditions: rationalist and post-positivist. The rationalist traditions treat burden-sharing actors as rational and focus on the cost and benefit calculations of the Alliance or its individual members (Zyla 2018, p. 517). Typically, the emphasis has been on measurable material facts, such as physical resources, material wealth, capabilities or the physical qualities of the current security environment. The recent shift from rationalist approaches towards more constructive post-positivist approaches has widened the scope of the burden-sharing research as the focus has moved further from economic theories and public good theories to comprise topics such as risk-sharing and public norms on war (Jakobsen 2018, p. 494, 497). As a consequence, the burden-sharing discussion is not considered solely from the perspective of financial burden and budgetary targets but also takes into consideration member

states' commitment to develop defence plans and credible capabilities and to decide among them how to divide the tasks and responsibilities (Mattelaer 2016, p. 31).

While the traditional, rationalist literature alone is not enough to create a comprehensive understanding of burden-sharing as a socio-political process that develops in a geopolitical and historical context, it is by no means useless or out-dated. Positivist and quantitative research on burden-sharing is needed especially when reviewing the financial and material contributions to NATO. Still, it appears to be the growing trend of the discipline to accept the idea that qualitative analysis complements traditional quantitative, positivist analysis (see Becker 2017, Zyla 2018, Jakobsen 2017). This is why our research approaches burden-sharing as a socially constructed intersubjective phenomenon while also taking into account the underlying power structures, state interests and bargains that affect burden-sharing. Relying on analytical eclecticism makes it possible to consider the material and structural factors of burden-sharing while combining them with social and ideational factors, such as norms, values and beliefs and also power structures in a broader sense.

What have been the major events in the history of international relations that have raised the burden-sharing debate on the very top of NATO's agenda, and most importantly, what might be an event of similar scale in the future that could possibly turn out to be fatal for NATO? The historical and contemporary development of burden-sharing disputes can be observed by following consistently four drivers in the Cold War, post-Cold War and post-Crimean (post-2014) security context. These are 1) *geopolitical changes related to Russia*, 2) *US retrenchment or renewal*, 3) *European passivity or activism* and 4) *significant NATO out-of-area operations*. Each of these drivers has tended to produce and aggravate NATO's burden-sharing disputes. They do not appear in turns or in any specific order but may appear in political space simultaneously so that NATO

often faces several burden-sharing drivers and disputes at the same. Likewise, the frequency and length of their appearance in political space is random and can be observed as cycles. Moreover, the drivers should not be seen as co-equals as each driver has its specific social and political logic in influencing the direction and tone of burden-sharing disputes. Following these drivers allows us to analyse what kind of signs of intra-alliance tension can be found in the past and present, and to analyse what kind of consequences the debate has had on NATO, and also to what extent the tensions are applicable when assessing the future of NATO and transatlantic relations in broader terms.

The burden-sharing debate has been going on for decades but it has not always been a priority for the member states or for the Alliance as a whole. By looking for themes of change and continuity in the burden-sharing debate, we seek to reveal patterns of when and why burden-sharing becomes a hot topic of debate, which allows us to forecast what kind of themes may surface in the future debates. The aim of the research is not to create deterministic predictions on NATO's future role, position in the international security environment or military capabilities. Instead, the aim is to recognise key variables and questions on burden-sharing and critically analyse them when assessing NATO's future position in European and transatlantic security context. Revealing key variables, themes and indicators can help us to analyse future developments and also recognise early warning signals of possible crises facing the Alliance.

References

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